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*Villagers from Dampula, Sri Lanka, walk through a prop wash created by a 33rd Rescue Squadron HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter during Operation Unified Assistance. Because many roads and bridges were impassable, the 33rd ferried the goods to coastal communities that needed them the most.*

# Mission of Mercy

by Master Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.



photos by Master Sgt. Val Gempis

*Air Force Rescue Squadron offers a different kind of helping hand in Sri Lanka*

Members of the 33rd Rescue Squadron from Kadena Air Base, Japan, played a small but vital part in Operation Unified Assistance, but it left a lasting impression.

With their six HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopters, the squadron helped transport 4,000 tons of supplies to coastal communities wiped out by a tsunami the day after Christmas.

In Indonesia, emergency relief efforts slowly transformed into long-term reconstruction. Although some military organizations will remain to provide support during the transition, many — including the 33rd Res-

cue Squadron — departed, having fulfilled its mission.

“I am humbled to have had the skills that helped the survivors of this disaster,” said Col. Mark Schissler, 374th Air Expeditionary Wing commander while deployed to Thailand. “I’ve used my skills in combat and in peace. There’s a definite sense of personal satisfaction when you know your mission has been completed and it has helped someone you never met.

“That’s what makes America great,” the colonel said. “We are a rich nation with much to give, and we’ll give it to anyone who needs it — regardless of their beliefs or religion.”



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**Men from the village of Dampula, Sri Lanka** (above), load vegetables on board an HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter under the watchful eye of aerial gunner Senior Airman Jeff Layton, Kadena Air Base, Japan. An estimated 1 million people were left homeless in the country. The vegetables were delivered to the communities that needed them the most. A crowd of onlookers (right) watch Kadena helicopters get loaded with relief supplies for their neighbors on the coast. Maj. Steve Walker (far right), pilot, discusses a flight with Sri Lankan air force Flight Lieutenants Nipuna Thanippuliarachchi and Desbepriya Silva at Katunayake Air Force Base. Air Force, Navy and Coast Guard helicopters flew 222 missions to support Operation Unified Assistance.







**Staff Sgt. Rob Ivory, a 33rd Rescue Squadron life support technician** (far left), inspects flight gear while aircrews are on a mission. Senior Airman Matt Morrow (above), an HH-60 aerial gunner, scans the Sri Lankan horizon during a tsunami relief mission in January. HH-60 helicopter crew chief Senior Airman William Soars (left) inspects an aircraft during sunrise. An estimated 40,000 Sri Lankans died after a killer wave hit the island Dec. 26.